



Reciprocity belief and gratitude as moderators of the association between social status and charitable giving



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of social status on charitable giving by individuals. Based on research on economic reciprocity, two psychological mechanisms, i.e., reciprocity belief and gratitude sentiment, are proposed to explain the association between social status and charitable giving. Participants were asked to recall the nature of their money giving as it usually occurs across different types of donations. They also reported their socioeconomic status, degree of reciprocity belief, and level of gratitude. Results showed that social status significantly predicted charitable giving by individuals. As predicted, high-status participants donated more money when they held a stronger belief in reciprocity, whereas low-status participants tended to be more generous in their donations when they felt more gratitude.

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1. Introduction

Hierarchies of differentiation, one of the most fundamental features of social relations, can shape individuals' cognition and behavior in a hierarchy-reinforcing manner (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). It is traditionally believed that individuals ranking high in the social hierarchy have obligations to reward, or reciprocate to, society. Accordingly, research has confirmed that, for individuals, higher social status is related to increased generosity and prosociality (e.g., Leslie, Snyder, & Glomb, 2013; Wiepking & Maas, 2009).

However, recent evidence shows a different pattern: individuals low in social status appear to exhibit higher levels of prosocial behavior compared to those who are high in social status (e.g., Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015; Visser & Roelofs, 2011). While low-status individuals have fewer available resources relative to high-status individuals, their intrinsic concern for others may promote them to care for others' interests, even at the cost of their own (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). In this article, we attempt to reconcile the above two ostensibly conflicting views on charitable giving, which is a form of prosocial behavior.

1.1. Reciprocity-based mechanism of charitable giving

One of the basic mechanisms behind charitable giving is reciprocity (Khadjavi, 2016). In economics, reciprocity is viewed as a strategic behavior to achieve social cooperation (Fehr & Rockenbach, 2004). Because donations are sent to charitable organizations or to recipients unknown by the donors, reciprocity usually occurs among more than two unacquainted individuals. Accordingly, two types of economic reciprocity are related to charitable giving, one is called *downstream reciprocity*, and another one is called *upstream reciprocity* (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). In downstream reciprocity, what a person receives from a third party is due to what she or he has done to a second person. Thus, for example, if person A has helped person B in the past, then there is an increased chance that person A will receive help from a third person C in future. A necessary prerequisite for person A receiving help from person C later on is that person A's behavior has been witnessed by person C. In upstream reciprocity, what a person decides to impose on another person depends on what she or he has received from a third party. Thus, for example, if person A helps person B, person B subsequently helps a third person C. Thus, person B should experience a feeling of indebtedness strong enough to spread her or his generosity to others.

Downstream and upstream reciprocity are distinct in that they are driven by different mechanisms. Research has widely demonstrated that downstream reciprocity is motivated by rewarding incentives (such as a gain in reputation or status), while upstream reciprocity occurs as a result of individuals' positive emotional experience in the past (such as gratitude) (Baker & Bulkley, 2014; Nowak & Sigmund,

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2005). Moreover, both kinds of reciprocity are governed by distinct neural mechanisms (Watanabe et al., 2014). For downstream reciprocity, cooperation occurs from activating a brain region associated with self-centered cognition (i.e., the precuneus). However, for upstream reciprocity, cooperation is elicited by a brain region associated with emotional rewards (i.e., the anterior insula). Psychologically, we argue that individuals' beliefs and expectations about future rewards promote their prosocial behavior in downstream reciprocity, whereas for upstream reciprocity, individuals' positive experience of gratitude during their past social interactions as recipients facilitates their behavior. In the following pages, we will examine these two psychological mechanisms underlying reciprocity and explain their relationship with the charitable behavior of individuals with different social status.

1.2. Belief in reciprocity: when high-status individuals donate

One key psychological mechanism underlying downstream reciprocity is that individuals have a firm belief that their generosity will be rewarded in future. The degree to which individuals endorse reciprocity in mutually beneficial relationships has been conceptualized as *belief in reciprocity*, which considers the benefits of efficiency from following any reciprocity rule (Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003). Moreover, reciprocity belief is a personality trait and consequently, people vary in their belief in reciprocity (Restubog, Garcia, Wang, & Cheng, 2010). Thus, individuals who believe that their charitable giving can be paid back will likely enable reciprocal altruism.

Research has found that individuals of high-status give significantly more in a dictator game when their identities are revealed along with their donations than when their identities are not revealed; however, giving of low-status individuals is influenced by whether the identity of their high-status counterpart is revealed (Reinstein & Riener, 2012). Consequently, the revealed identity of high-status members leads individuals of high-status to believe that a good reputation confers better benefits, but leads individuals of low-status to feel pressured to contribute. In addition, because high status means control of resources and authoritative power, high-status individuals may believe that they are capable of maximizing their own interests by signaling their generosity more firmly than low-status individuals. In this way, high-status individuals believe that reciprocity leads to more benefits; however, low-status individuals may be unsure about whether their kindness would be repaid, and thus, they will reciprocate infrequently. In summary, it appears that belief in reciprocity shapes social cooperation of high-status individuals more compared to that of low-status individuals. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1. Reciprocity beliefs will more positively predict charitable giving for high-status individuals compared to low-status individuals.

1.3. Gratitude sentiment: when low-status individuals donate

In upstream reciprocity, when a person is given something of value by someone else, a positive sentiment of gratitude occurs for the recipient (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Moreover, experiencing gratitude motivates individuals to reciprocate the assistance they receive from others in a prosocial manner, or even to extend their generosity to third parties. On the other hand, a lack of experiencing gratitude may lead to inaction (van Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Pannebakker, & Out, 2010).

Compared to high-status individuals, low-status individuals are more likely to allow them to be placed in the position of a recipient in social interaction (Nadler, 2016). Low-status individuals may feel financially inadequate, which in turn causes decreased prosociality. They may also possibly experience an unpleasant and aversive psychological state of indebtedness. However, feeling of gratitude can offset the negative psychological effect caused by the social experience of being in a

low-status position. This is supported by the fact that gratitude is related to a wide variety of social and psychological benefits (Watkins, 2014).

Therefore, by reciprocating others' assistance with gratitude, low-status individuals will be likely to reduce the negative feelings that accompany being low status and thus improve their social functioning. We thus reason that the social behavior of low- rather than high-status individuals is more likely to be influenced by gratitude experienced during past social interactions. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Feelings of gratitude will more positively predict charitable giving for low-status individuals compared to high-status individuals.

1.4. Current study

The current study aims to examine the psychological mechanisms of individual charitable giving in a Chinese sample. Evidence shows that Chinese people are not generous with their financial resources (CAF, 2016). A narrow understanding on the nature of charitable giving however, leads to an underestimation of Chinese people's participation in philanthropy. In fact, Chinese socio-cultural, economic, and religious underpinnings all point towards increased growth in giving (Tipton, 2012). For the purpose of this research, charitable giving is broadly defined as sacrificing one's own resources (money, property, assets, or goods) to benefit others in need. The resources can be given directly to the organization or people in need, via payroll deduction, or online. In this way, our measure of charitable giving is split into different ways to donate.

Although reciprocity motivates charitable giving, it is not altogether altruistic (Ashley, Ball, & Eckel, 2010). Evidence shows that truly altruistic motivations exist for why individuals give to others. Moreover, these can be evoked by feeling empathy for the person in need (Eino, 2008; Wiepking & Maas, 2009). In addition, adopting the perspective of the person in need and thus, reducing the psychological distance between self and others, also enhances sympathetic feelings and altruistic behaviors (Henderson, Huang, & Chang, 2012; Smith, Faro, & Burson, 2013). Since these emotional and cognitive altruistic drivers may weaken the effect of reciprocity on charitable giving, their confounding effects are statistically controlled for. Specifically, empathic concern and perceived close relationship were used as covariates in our study.

2. Methods

2.1. Samples

Data were collected using a professional online survey platform, which provides a contracted data collection service. It guarantees that data will be collected from a large sample, and the service maintains strict quality control on the sampling procedure to ensure accuracy of the data. A sample of 315 respondents was collected within three days of launching the survey. The IP address of each participant's computer indicated that the sample spanned geographical regions. Among the available data, 148 (47%) were male, and 167 (53%) were female. Their age ranged from 20 to 67 years, with a mean of 32.94 years ($SD = 7.90$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Charitable giving

To avoid any potential contamination, charitable giving by individuals was first measured. Participants were requested to report the monetary amount of their donations during the course of a calendar year. This was measured in three ways: donation to charitable organizations, donation to individuals, and any remaining donations, respectively. For each aspect of charitable giving, four questions were included to cover

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